

## Marion Historical Commission – Who We Are and What We Do

By Meg Steinberg

Many people are asking what the newly reconstituted Marion Historical Commission is all about. How are we different from the Sippican Historical Society? Why does Marion need two separate historical organizations?

In reality, the two organizations are **very** different. The Sippican Historical Society is a privately funded 501(c)(3) non-profit organization with dues-paying membership. According to the SHS website, it was “founded in 1963 for the purpose of fostering interest in the history of Marion, encouraging historical research and writing, and establishing a museum to preserve and display artifacts, documents, and artwork pertaining to the town.” The museum and society are housed in the historic Walton Nye Ellis house at the corner of Main and Front Streets in Marion.

The Society has been an active voice for the preservation of historic buildings as one facet of its many roles in exploring Marion’s history through its collections of historic artifacts and documents. As preservation activist, the Society has led the way in such projects as the preservation of the village post office and Walton Nye Ellis House, the former Brown’s Pharmacy, Captain Hadley House and the Marion General Store.

Local Historical Commissions, on the other hand, are an important part of municipal government in Massachusetts. Almost all cities and towns in the state have established a local historical commission. Historical Commission members are appointed by the Select Board and bring an array of talents and knowledge of history, architecture and preservation planning to the Commission. Our new Commission is comprised of Will Tifft as Chairperson, Sidney Bowen, Bryan McSweeney, Meg Steinberg and Jane Tucker.

Historic Commissions are responsible for community-wide historic preservation planning and are guided and supported by the Massachusetts Historical Commission, the State Historic Preservation Office in Boston.

Compiling a historic properties inventory is an essential first step for a Historical Commission. This is done on MHC inventory forms. Inventory forms address the first task of preservation planning – Identification. The inventory of Marion’s resources was begun in 1998 when a preservation consultant was hired to do a town-wide overview. Close to 200 forms were completed, many of which covered large groupings of buildings with minimal property-specific information.

Now, the Marion Historical Commission’s first objective is to update and complete the town-wide survey to current state specifications, which now include digital recording and availability on the statewide MACRIS website. Funding requests to the Massachusetts Historical Commission and the Marion Community Preservation Commission have recently been made. Community approval of the CPC funds at May 2020 Town Meeting will ensure the survey can get started soon.

After a comprehensive survey is compiled, local commissions prioritize properties for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. The National Register is a formal federal recognition of the significance of the property *but places absolutely no restrictions or conditions on private property owners unless there is state or federal involvement in a project.*

The National Register is a federal listing of buildings, structures, sites, objects and districts significant in our nation's history, culture, architecture or archeology and that are worthy of preservation. Only two Marion properties are presently listed on the National Register, the H. R. Reed House at 46 Water Street and the Bird Island Lighthouse. Many, many more Marion properties are eligible for individual listing or for listing as part of an historic district. This designation is known to increase property values and community pride.

Other responsibilities of a Local Historical Commission may include requests from federal or state agencies to evaluate state or federally-assisted projects in the town that may impact historic or archeological resources. Having a complete historic inventory on hand enables the Commission to evaluate potential harmful impacts and argue for more historically-sensitive treatments.

Historical Commissions play a leadership role in public education that the community's historic resources are important to preserve. Walking tours, plaques, newspaper articles, and public lectures are some of the ways this can happen. In fact, a little-known walking tour of the Wharf Village (Marion Village area) was prepared in 1998 by the Sippican Historical Society. It will soon be reprinted and made more available to the public.

Historical Commissions advise elected officials and other boards on historic preservation issues. Issues could include zoning changes, the re-use of municipally-owned historic buildings, master planning or preservation of historic landscapes.

Ordinarily, Historical Commissions do NOT have a regulatory function. However, many towns have opted for bylaw protections, through local bylaws adopted at Town Meeting, to better protect local resources. Examples might be local historic districts (with design review of certain exterior changes), demolition delay bylaws, scenic road bylaws or village center zoning. These options may eventually be considered in Marion but certainly not without long and thorough public education and understanding of their merits in advance.

For now, the Marion Historical Commission is excited to take on its official role of community preservation leadership for the Town. There is a new presence on the Town of Marion website, ([www.marionma.gov/historical-commission](http://www.marionma.gov/historical-commission)), including our Mission Statement and links to important local historic maps and the MACRIS inventory database.

The webpage will contain updates on local preservation concerns such as the preservation of the Marion Town House and protection of the H.H. Richardson-designed Percy Browne House at 192 Front Street.